

Those who served: One veteran remembers

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His earliest memories of Veterans Day are as a boy – standing at attention in his yard in Chicago as the clock tolled the “11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month” – the time that marked the end of World War I.

Originally known as Armistice Day, the designation was changed in the United States by President Dwight Eisenhower in 1953 to focus recognition on the contributions and sacrifices of military members past and present. Sacrifices and contributions the Chicago boy soon learned about first hand.

As a retired major now, Earl W. Rudolph, a decorated World War II veteran and local Lakenheath resident, had a military career that spanned 30 years and three wars. During his service, which began in the Army Air Corps and proceeded to the Army Air Force, he witnessed the birth of the current Air Force and numbered among its premier population.

“I enlisted in the Illinois Army National Guard in 1937 when I was 16 and a half,” a feat Rudolph recalled was only possible with his mother’s permission.

Then, in 1941, he signed up for one year of full-time federal service but the events of Dec. 7, 1941, quickly negated the one-year rule. “We were in for the duration,” he said.

As a graduate of the ordnance school in Aberdeen, Md., Rudolph saw an opportunity with the Army Air Corps as an aviation ordnance specialist.

He became a member of the 306th Bomb Group (Heavy) based in England – a group that boasted the distinctive motto “First Over Germany” for their participation in initial B-17 missions over the Nazi-occupied land.

Rudolph himself voluntarily participated in seven missions over the enemy-occupied territory as an ordnance officer – namely to discover the cause of a bomb-release problem that would occur on some of the missions. Sometimes he would even have to manually release the 1,000-pound bombs – ducking flying debris due to anti-aircraft fire.

“They knew we were there. They were shooting at us,” he said.

But not long after he returned from the seventh mission, he made a grim discovery.

“I took off my left flying boot and it was loaded with blood.”

He quickly put his boot back on and headed for the rapid response area on the flightline – a tent set up to provide immediate medical treatment to casualties.

“Some of the guys came in pretty bad,” he said.



Photo by SrA. Robert Gerlach

Maj. (ret) Earl Rudolph, a World War II veteran living in the United Kingdom, reflects on the names of Air Force Medal of Honor recipients at RAF Lakenheath's Wings of Liberty Park.

Rudolph had overflowing praise for all the doctors who attended him, especially for their unwavering commitment to saving his foot.

“I told them if you have to take it off, don’t wake me up. But the docs wouldn’t let up, they stayed with it and were successful.”

The doctors did, however, warn him that his foot may give him future problems. That prediction came true four years ago. Today, he has to walk with a specially fitted shoe because of some bone damage.

That seventh mission wasn’t the first time Rudolph faced the inherent dangers of waging war. In August 1944, he responded when a fully loaded B-17 -- bombs and all -- went down in Thurleigh, England. He and another lieutenant quickly assessed the situation and determined one of the bombs still had its fuse and was therefore armed. Although the fuse was bent and damaged by the aircraft crash, Rudolph managed to remove the fuse and save the ordnance.

According to the citation for the Soldier’s Medal he subsequently received, “Had this bomb not been defused it would have been impossible for anyone to go near the wreckage either to obtain the bodies of the men who were killed or to salvage any of the aircraft. The courage and split-second thinking of Lt. Rudolph on this occasion helped to save lives and government property.”

To Rudolph, his activity was a natural reaction – that of a soldier serving his coun-

try, giving whatever it took.

“No one knows how much they (the military) are going to ask of you,” he said. “I was in World War II and I was on duty and available during Korea and Vietnam. I remain proud of my service and those I served with. There are many still around who gave supreme sacrifice – they are armless, legless, some in veteran hospitals — but I never heard any complaints.”

After World War II, Rudolph temporarily left the service but was recalled during Korea and stayed – working in services until he retired in 1967.

His Soldier’s Medal would not be the only decoration he earned for his service in World War II. He also received the Silver Star, from then Maj. Gen. Charles Link, 3rd Air Force commander. In a letter, Link noted that Rudolph’s award “serves to remind those of us serving here today just how much you and your fellow airmen accomplished.”

Receiving the Silver Star was humbling for Rudolph, a veteran who still recalls the sacrifices and contributions of fellow veterans – thoughts that flooded his mind after the ceremony.

But the defining moment came when, driving home after the ceremony, one of his grandchildren asked to hold the medal.

Suddenly he stopped, his voice choked with emotion,

“You couldn’t buy a moment like that for all the money in the world.”